

Testimony of Robert Bettmann to the
Committee on Government Operations and the Environment
(Councilmember Mary Cheh, Chair) and the
Committee of the Whole
(Chairman Vincent C. Gray, Chair)
regarding B18-564, the "Healthy Schools Act"

March 25th 2010

Thank you ~~Chairman Gray~~, Committee Chair Cheh, ~~council staff~~, and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today. I'm speaking to you today as an artist, educator, and Chair of the DC Advocates for the Arts. I have two points I'd like to make today regarding the proposed Healthy Schools Act.

- 1- Healthy Schools initiatives should include arts education.
- 2- Existing dance programming should be allowed to fulfill expanded PE requirements, and should in turn be expanded as an option to fulfill physical education requirements.

In talking with one of my friends (~~Amy Melrose~~) about the Healthy Schools Act, she remarked that, "holistic and creative approaches to health should include the arts and movement in addition to healthier and more nutritious food." I couldn't agree more. As you are aware, money not spent on education ends up being spent on prisons; money not spent helping children acquire healthy habits in eating and exercise end up being spent on health care; and money not spent encouraging students toward 21st century job skills end up spent in unemployment programs and job training. The city already supports dance programming as a PE option in several schools. As this bill is revised, I hope that you will find ways to encourage economic efficiency, and support for the arts, by explicitly encouraging students to fulfill their PE requirement through dance classes.

One of the issues that the arts community shared with you on our recent Arts Advocacy Day was that low income students who are low performing in primary and middle school tend to stay low performing in high school, and are more liable to drop out. Research shows that participation in the arts, as in physical education, can help students develop their will to achieve - called "executive function" in the literature - and overcome otherwise normal difficulties. While the city can do more to help students on the cusp of success, more also needs to be done for students on the cusp of failure. To achieve the desired outcomes, holistic health initiatives for District school children should include the arts, and I hope to have the opportunity to speak with you further about this issue.

Finally, while the Healthy Schools Act will pay for itself long term, this year it has to be paid for, and balanced against other social service spending. Similarly, the city needs to balance spending on social services with spending to maintain tax revenues. Dedicated funding for the arts was reduced by over 50% from FY 09 to FY 10. In 2005, Arts and Culture organizations in the District paid \$335 million in wages to residents and \$62 million in taxes (directly related to more than 11,000 full time jobs.) Further reductions

in dedicated arts funding would adversely affect city tax revenue. As the FY 11 budget is debated, I hope that you will confidently balance spending on social services, with efficient development investment that creates revenue for the city.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you, and for your thoughtful work on behalf of District residents. I know it's not an issue that people vote around, but in the end the most important social service you provide is your support of sound economic policies for the District of Columbia. Thank you for your integrity and will in making the difficult choices required over the coming months.

Robert Bettmann
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Chair, DC Advocates for the Arts